



A Report on the IAWRT Seminar
**Hum Gunahgaar Auratein/
We Sinful Women**

***Feminist Cultures of Resistance:
Conversations on Art and Activism in South Asia***

8 March 2014, Library, Goethe Institut / Max Mueller Bhawan, New Delhi
Conceived and Coordinated by Dr. Uma Chakravarti and Anupama Chandra

Activists, artists, academics, artists and the people of Delhi gathered to celebrate International Women's Day at a day-long event organized by the India Chapter of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT) in association with ActionAid India, Jagori, Sangat South Asia, IDRC and Zubaan. The event was conceived and coordinated by Dr. Uma Chakravarti (feminist historian) and Anupama Chandra (film editor).

The day featured a series of conversations and performances exploring feminist art, activism and resistance in South Asia. It was a celebration of feminist politics and of the evolution of different forms of cultural resistance and activism, often in highly repressive environments. There were participating artists and activists from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, many of whom had suffered political and social reprisal for their work.

Resistance was a common thread in the four sessions of the day:

1. Interventions and Subversions: Redrawing the Visual Canon

This was a session on the visual arts moderated by Sabeena Gadihoke, filmmaker, cameraperson and writer. Participating artists included Salima Hashmi (Pakistan), Anita Dube (India), Mithu Sen (India) and Chitra Ganesh (India/USA)

2. Living in Troubled Times: A New Generation in Conversation

This was a conversation between a younger generation of feminist social and political activists moderated by Dr. Uma Chakravarti. Participants included Amar Sindhu (Pakistan), Hana Shams Ahmed (Bangladesh), Dolly Kikon (India), Parismita Singh (India), Gazala Peer (India) and Priya Thangarajah (Sri Lanka).

3. Udaas Mausam Ke Khilaaf: Cultures of Resistance

This session looked at poetry and performance as acts of political resistance. Urvashi Butalia, feminist author and publisher, moderated the session. Participants included Fahmida Riaz (poet, Pakistan), Nahid Siddiqui (dancer, Pakistan), Mangai (theatre activist, India) and Kutti Revathi (poet, India).

4. Hitting Back with Humour: Laughter as Sabotage

The final session of the day looked at the power of humour as resistance and social commentary. It featured performances by Vasu Primlani (stand up comedian, India) and Maya Krishna Rao (theatre actor and director, India).

Opening



The day began with songs about freedom from oppression on the open lawns of Max Mueller Bhawan, led by Kamla Bhasin. She gathered the assembling participants and audience into an informal and spontaneous bout of slogan-shouting and singing, kicking the day off to an energetic start. (Hum kya chahte? Azadi! Patriarchy se? Azadi! (What do we want? Freedom! Freedom from patriarchy) and "We all madly love to sing and dance and read poetry."

After this, people walked into the library of Max Mueller Bhawan, past an installation by Dolly Kikon and Parasmitta Singh, that represented the Assamese women weavers and their struggle.

Robin Mallick from the Goethe-Institut/ Max Mueller Bhawan welcomed the audience, and Reena Mohan (Managing Trustee, IAWRT India) and Uma Chakravarti each gave a note of thanks to the organizers, funders and participants.

Uma Chakravarti told the audience how Amar Sindhu, a young poet and activist from Pakistan, had arrived just that morning, after going through tremendous trouble to get a visa on time. Despite having to run behind some twenty different agencies for an NOC (No Objection Certificate) to travel to India, she made it somehow. Her arrival was celebrated as a symbol of the activist's spirit to face up to odds, no matter what. Dr. Chakravarti also pointed out that Amar had to fly to India via Dubai, which "says something about the long distance between India and Pakistan today."



Before the first session, Neeraj Malik read Kishwar Naheed's Urdu poem 'Hum Gunahgaar Auratein' ('We Sinful Women') – from which the title of the IAWRT event was drawn – a piece that comments on the walls that metaphorically barricade a woman's freedom, and deem it a sin:

*Ye hum gunahgaar auratein hein
Jo ahl-e jabba ki tamkinat se
Na rob khaayein
Na jaan bechein
Na sar jhukaayein
Na haath jodein
Ye hum gunahgaar auratein hein
Ke jin ke jismon ki fasl bechein jo log
Voh sarfaraaz thahrein
Nayaabat-e imtiyaaz thahrein
Voh daavar-e ahl-e saaz thahrein
Ye hum gunahgaar auratein hein
Ke sach ka parcham utha ke niklein
To jhoot se shaah-raahein ati mile hein
Har ek dahleez pe sazaaon ki daastaanein rakhi mile hein
Jo bol sakti theen voh zubaanein kati mile hein*



(It is we sinful women
who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns
who don't sell our lives
who don't bow our heads
who don't fold our hands together.
It is we sinful women
while those who sell the harvests of our bodies
become exalted
become distinguished
become the just princes of the material world.
It is we sinful women
who come out raising the banner of truth
up against barricades of lies on the highways
who find stories of persecution piled on each threshold
who find that tongues which could speak have been severed.)

Through the day, the atmosphere was celebratory and charged with the spirit of a politics that celebrated feminism, liberalism, rights and democracy. The speakers discussed the many troubling issues facing South Asia today with uncompromising directness, wit, humour and – above all – concern. All the sessions were packed, with standing room only, from morning through till night.

Session 1: Interventions and Subversions: Redrawing the Visual Canon

Moderator: **Sabeena Gadihoke**

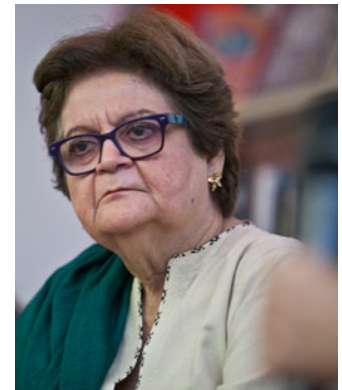
Participants: **Salima Hashmi (Pakistan), Anita Dube (India), Mithu Sen (India) and Chitra Ganesh (India/USA)**



Sabeena Gadihoke introduced this session with the story of her documentary *Three Women and A Camera* about three women photographers. Sabeena noted that she was often questioned for focusing her film on women. She felt a film about male photographers would not have faced the same questions, for excluding female characters from its narrative. Sabeena spoke of “the gaze” with which people look at cinema and stories. Today, she pointed out, there exists a more heterogeneous “gaze.” She explained that we live in a society characterized by a multiplicity of perspectives: for her a film with female characters is a representation of the multiplicity of human perspective. The film raised the question about whether the representation of an identity in itself ought to be the motivation behind art?

Sabeena then moved on to introducing the first speaker of the day, Salima Hashmi.

Salima Hashmi is a painter, art educationist, writer and curator from Lahore, Pakistan. She was educated at the National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore, the Bath Academy of Art, U.K., and the Rhode Island School of Design, USA. She taught for 30 years at NCA, Pakistan’s premier art institution, and retired as its Principal. She has exhibited her own work, travelled and lectured extensively all over the world, and curated about a dozen international art shows in the U.K., Europe, the USA, Australia, Japan and India. She is a recipient of The President’s Award for Pride of Performance, Pakistan. She is currently Dean at the School of Visual Arts and Design at the Beaconhouse National University Lahore.



Salima presented a fascinating slideshow on the work of Pakistani women artists and spoke about the role of women living under a military dictatorship. The work displayed by her brought alive the struggles, the camaraderie and dialectics of women in Pakistan. It gave the audience an access to a time and space they had little exposure to. Moreover, her presentation was characterized by a delightfully dry humour and wit that had the audience laughing delightedly at the creative and never-say-die spirit of Pakistani women activists and artists.

She began with photographs that showed the demonstrations against Pakistan’s Hudood Ordinance (“New Law of Evidence”) on 12 February 1983. This was a law that diminished a woman’s word against that of a man in a court of law. This was a significant moment for the women’s movement in Pakistan: women artists and activists got together to submit a manifesto in response to the oppressive law. While the manifesto was not made public, it enabled artists to recognize a responsibility towards their world, and art by women in Pakistan became a stronger force of resistance. Artists such as Nahid Raza began to channel their own lives in their work. Salima then spoke about another directive that ordered Pakistani women to cover themselves with a sheet (chaddar). This became a point of debate at the art school where Salima taught, as neither the students nor the faculty could imagine submitting to the new order, or even working while draped in a sheet. Salima then recounted that she came up with the idea of writing to the powers-that-be that chaddars were a safety hazard for working artists and sculptors. She added that they never heard back from them, and the art school carried on pretty much as before.

Salima then showed the work of several artists who began to work with the idea of the chaddar turning it into a symbol of resistance. Their practice involved an exploration of forms that could express external and internal dialogues in response to oppressive laws. Artist Aisha Khalid drew motifs on the chaddar to represent ideas such as the sounds of the silenced female voice and the defenses put up by the female body. Tazeen Qayyum's work displayed a sense of humor, the image of burkha clad women bringing to mind the hilarity of a directive that forced women to cover up. The work was a tongue-in-cheek look at the chaddar within the context of evolution and adaptation.

However, there were deeply disturbing moments in Salima's presentation as well: for example, when she showed her own haunting painting: A Poem for Zainab – which she made in a state of despair, after hearing about a case of violent abuse in which a woman's abusive husband had thrust a heated electric rod up her vagina.

Salima pointed out that while the rest of the world became globalized, women in Pakistan evolved their own language, living as they were in a state of isolation under a military dictatorship. She had an interesting account about a visit she made to India in which she realized that women artists in India were, in fact, in a worse position than their Pakistani counterparts. She discovered that very few women in India were appointed to teach art in art schools and departments: an organized, misogynistic exclusion. Salima said that she realized in Pakistan, over the years, women had been pushed into art schools and not allowed into coveted science and technology courses. Inevitably, therefore, Pakistani art departments were dominated by women – which turned out to be a very fortunate circumstance indeed.

Salima Hashmi's presentation covered a remarkable collection of work and themes of the body and mind. It raised questions about the work women do and the spaces that they are allowed to occupy. It brought to life stories about women who are brutalized by honor killings and ended on images of a recent anti-Taliban demonstration in Pakistan. It left us with the haunting image of a girl skipping in front of a burning Lahore. The presentation was an inspiring glimpse into the work, concerns and methods of women artists in Pakistan. Above all it showed us the tremendous courage of Pakistani women and their determination to fight on – in one of the most repressive societies in the world.



Anita Dube is an art historian and critic turned artist from New Delhi, India. She works with a conceptual language that valorizes the sculptural fragment as a bearer of personal and social memory, history, mythology, and phenomenological experience. Dube investigates a very human concern with both personal and societal loss and regeneration. Marked by her early engagement with the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association, she has since attempted to work with both an 'erotics' and a 'politics' that investigates the resistance of individuals and women, against the overarching idea of 'power'. Her work has been exhibited widely nationally and internationally.

Anita began by explaining her own process of "becoming" an artist as a series of unplanned events, an organic process. Art practice became her medium of expression over time. Anita read out a long and meditative poem which she had written at the time she decided to first work in art. Through slides, she traced the evolution of her work over a period of time.

Anita began with an image of her very first sculptural work, a larger than life-sized wooden hand reaching out to a ball. This wooden installation represented the act of someone trying to escape oppression. Details such as the softness in the features of the hand showed how, as

Anita explained, “oppression can be tender, it doesn’t have to be violent.” Anita spoke of her journey with different artistic media, starting with wood and then moving on to velvet, wire, human bone, wax and several other materials.

Anita showed slides of her work on themes of femininity within architecture. Some of her work with the eyes of traditional deities gave new meaning to old ideas. When a deity is adorned with eyes, it is said to come to life. In her work, Anita attempted to share the divinity and the life in the eyes by transposing the eyes of traditional deities onto walls, in the shape of beehives, and also creating several sculptures with them.

She showed images of her work with human bones covered in velvet, and disturbing images of a bride’s trousseau made out of human bone. In another piece, Anita used photographs of herself as transformed into a Muslim man, ‘Noor Mohammad’, to experiment with notions of her own identity.

The larger themes of Anita’s work were often employed in a playful and thought provoking manner such as recent experiments with words written into mediums like meat and wax. In one installation, she wrote the word ‘WAR’ in neon lights on a street corner with people mistaking it for ‘BAR.’ She showed some of her experiments with camouflage material. By covering everyday things in camouflage she said that like a militaristic environment “everything cancels each other out in camouflage.” This was her expression of what militarism does to a culture. Anita’s more recent work questioned the cost of rapid urbanization in Gurgaon, violence in Kashmir, and violence against women. Through simple images and materials, Anita was able to embed complex political questions into the minds of her audience.



Mithu Sen is a graduate of Santiniketan, India, and the Glasgow School of Art, UK. Sen’s works are conceptual and interactive. She works in a wide variety of media, making site and time specific installations that often combine drawings, sculpture, video, sound and poetry. A juxtaposition of sexuality, decay and birth is conveyed through her images. Sen’s practice continually engages with the language of visual poetry to construct and deconstruct the idea of identity through the matrix of being a human, a woman, an artist and a global citizen. Sen has exhibited around 15 solo shows and several exhibitions at prestigious museums, biennales, galleries, and art festivals all over the world. She is also a poet with a few solo books of Bengali poetry to her credit.

Mithu began with speaking about her journey as a poet, and with her experience of elitism in poetry. The daughter of a poet, she wanted to be one too, but after she moved to New Delhi she was deeply affected by linguist hierarchies that downgraded the native Bengali she wrote in. She then began producing poetry in the form of blank pages that held together “those des-

perate moments of silence". Mithu spoke about how, in her work, she is constantly searching for non-hierarchical working spaces, and using silence as a form of resistance. Through experiments with sound and language, she questioned the idea of communication and poetic verse, creating a new language of expression.

In her work as artist and sculptor, she said she was particularly interested "in drawing the marginal into the core through suppressed images." The images of her work were a powerful representation of subversive practice. The materials used by her include hair, blood, skin and teeth. While being ornamental and aesthetically pleasing, the work was often seen as sexually subversive, and challenged complacency in its viewers. She said that she loved "naughty" images and equated sexuality with self-confidence. Much of her work included transgressive representations of the human body – such as one of a defecating and naked man – to incite people into shock and contemplation. She spoke about the censorship of her diptych that included the defecating man, and forced it to be withdrawn from an exhibition in Brussels.

Mithu also spoke about her rejection of normative art practice. She once used her own apartment as a gallery space instead of using the museum space officially provided to her. Her exhibition titled 'Black Candy' provided the onlooker with an entirely sensual experience of touch, taste, sound, visual and smell. For another exhibition taking place outside the Indian context, she was asked to create work that could be identified as Indian. This push to display her identity led her to question the expectation that she has to be Indian through her art. Through both crushed pieces and images of the Taj Mahal, she questioned the essentialist idea of producing "Indian" art work.

Mithu's other work include an installation of images of her selling personal skills on a highway in South Africa (hitch-hiking carrying a placard labeled "artist") and images of posters of political figureheads torn by citizens in Bangladesh. She pointed out that her work has often been censored and come under political scrutiny. Despite this, she continues to find ways to raise powerful questions. Most recently, she contributed a work called 'ARTIST CUNT B A WOMAN' to a show she was invited to. Not only did the gallery withhold her work, they didn't ask her for a replacement exhibit.

Mithu ended by saying that she was provoked by refusal and would continue to make art. Through Mithu, one was able to identify the vibrant connection between resistance and art, and the lived experience of an artist who was actively working against the rigid social and sexual "normative".



Chitra Ganesh is a Brooklyn based artist currently living and working in Delhi. Her drawing, installation, text-based work, and collaborations seek to excavate and circulate buried narratives typically excluded from official canons of history, literature, and art. Her work has been widely exhibited at venues including the Museum of Contemporary Art (Shanghai), Devi Art Foundation (New Delhi), the Royal College of Art (London), and the Prince of Wales Museum (Mumbai). Her work is represented in prominent international collections. Ganesh is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including a 2012 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in the Creative Arts.

Chitra Ganesh's presentation focused on her wall installations and comic work. She explained that although she did not see it thus, her work was often interpreted as an example of the subversion of the women of South Asia. She wanted to free herself from these labels and began to

work on walls, using the freedom of sharp graphic lines. She spoke of a gaze that was dialectically formed where one looked at a piece of work which then looked back at you.



Through elements of the female body in a form of transformation or transgression, Chitra's work told interesting stories about her context, thought process and notions of femininity. Her work questioned the representation of women in traditional media. She reworked the popular mythological comic series Amar Chitra Katha in a series of paintings, and the narrative of women within these. By re-drawing the Amar Chitra Katha with female protagonists, she explored the suppressed female narrative. The words she used to tell the stories of women in her versions of the Amar Chitra Katha were part of a parallel and subversive narrative. The comic form, she said, was a popular one, but within it exists "the gutter" - or an absence - that was important to interpret, and her work focused on these absences. Comics to her were a place where she projected her own desires as a child, and later as an adult she extended the idea to explore what would happen if the female characters were allowed to dominate the narrative.

Chitra also showed some of her work that addressed existential questions by playing with science fiction imagery. She said she was drawn to psychedelia, and the idea of several narratives colliding, to breaking stories apart, and to ideas of multiple truths and melancholia.

Chitra raised the important issue that questions of identity were often marginalised, and seen as a handicap. She said her response was to seek positions outside power and powerlessness in her work, and spoke of her desire to reach diverse audiences, through books, comics and museums. Like Mithu, she was also interested in questioning the hierarchies within art spaces. Moderator Sabeena Gadihoke concluded the session with a summary of the binding themes within each talk. She noted that there were similar trends in each presentation, such as the dissolution of the purity of media, the use of the body, and questions of identity and subjectivity. She summarized that the work of the artists presented in this first session represented a subversive and exciting political critique.

The session was then opened up to questions from the audience.

Q & A

A member of the audience asked if the exhibition space was a question for the artist. This led to an interesting discussion on the role of art. Anita argued that the medium determines the space, while Mithu said that she was always in performance mode, trying to engage others in her work. Salima raised the important point that in Pakistan, where artists live with censorship, spaces are restricted but artists invent their own languages and new vocabularies to subvert the forces of oppression.

Another question was asked about the identity of the artist, and if this was a permanent one. Anita answered that to work as an artist was the only skill one had to offer to the world: "Even though there is a choice involved, after some time it is the only thing one can do." She explained

that once an artist grew to love the process of being an artist, it was not a label anymore. Mithu, however, answered that the label of 'artist' was something she questioned and acknowledged within her work. She saw it as a privilege alongside other labels, such as that of a sister, cook or wife. The label also allowed her a freedom she may not have otherwise had within her family, as artists were not expected to follow certain norms.



Chitra debated that categories were strategic for people to find a way to understand each other. To her, the label "artist" was one she preferred to any other.

Salima stated that "the world wants to make it convenient to have labels" but whether they applied or not was up to the individual.

The session ended with a young student asking Mithu to recite her poetry. Mithu immediately obliged, reciting one in the language she had invented to defy linguistic hierarchies. Although the words meant nothing, the tone she employed was emotionally dramatic and charged with meaning: her performance led to grand applause from the audience.

Session 2: Living in Troubled Times: A New Generation in Conversation

Dr. Uma Chakravarti, feminist historian, moderated the second session of the day. She began by telling the story of Amar Sidhu's journey through visa offices and bureaucracy to reach India, late in the morning of 8 March itself. She then requested Amar Sindhu to speak first.

Amar Sindhu is a writer, poet and activist from Pakistan.



Amar began by talking about her struggle to reach the session. She said that the difficulties she faced during the process made her think "we women are terrorists". Despite the hurdles, she was determined to reach the venue, and this spirit of activism was what drove her. She identified this spirit as a dream which is the defeat of fear. Amar said that resistance was her whole being: the way in which she understood her space – no life, she felt, was possible without resistance. She said that in her life she faced conflict in every direction, and at every breath.

Amar spoke about her personal journey as a writer, which began with political writing and shairi (Urdu poetry). She spoke about the politics of art, saying that even the act of writing a poem was to create a new conflict zone for the self. For her, she said, every personal choice was

political. She refused to wear the burkha and was shot at for her resistance against the silencing of women and artists.

Amar spoke about Sindh, her native province in Pakistan, where poverty was widespread. The previous year, 121 children had died in the area because of drought. At this point she felt that it would have been completely insensitive to have stayed out of politics.

Amar's work and ideas identified culture and social systems as the primary site of oppression. As a teacher, Amar was often asked by her students to teach them the Quran. She spoke about resisting this culture by organizing trips for her students to visit the graves of 'kari' women. These women were victims of "honor" killings, usually murdered for falling in love with people outside of their communities. Their graves are nameless and unmarked, and separate from other graveyards. Amar and her students celebrated Valentine's Day for these women. Amar said that she was not bringing about a revolution but instead creating a space for women, and celebrating the nameless and outcaste women who were killed for love.

Dr. Uma Chakravarti summarized Amar's talk by summarizing Amar's politics, in which the personal was the political. Amar's struggles with the students who asked her to prove the existence of God, or conflicts in her home, were all part of larger struggles. Even small acts of resistance such as the act of owning 'kari' women were reminders of the women who were killed for standing by their love relationships, refusing the family and community's attempts to control women's bodies.



Hana Shams Ahmed is the coordinator of the International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission (CHTC). The CHTC is an independent body working to promote respect for human rights, democracy, and restoration of civil and political rights, participatory development and land rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. Hana is also a freelance writer and has written about the rights of Bangladeshi migrant workers, citizenship and legal limbo of Urdu-speaking minorities, sexual harassment of women, abuse of domestic workers, nationalism and identity politics in the CHT, indigenous women's rights.

Hana began by talking about the nature of corporate feminist activism around the world. She spoke about the "March in Heels" campaign being organized by NGOs as part of the One Billion Rising campaign across Bangladesh and parts of the world. For women such as those who died in the Rana Plaza fire, and other women from low income backgrounds, heels were irrelevant to their struggle for survival. Hana's criticism of such campaigns was part of a larger critique of NGOs that, hand in hand with corporations, were co-opting parts of the women's movements. Hana then spoke about her own work with the Chittagong Hill Tribes (CHT) fighting against ethnocentric oppression. Sovereignty was a major issue for these hill tribes. Although trials are conducted, rapes that took place during the insurgency have not been addressed.

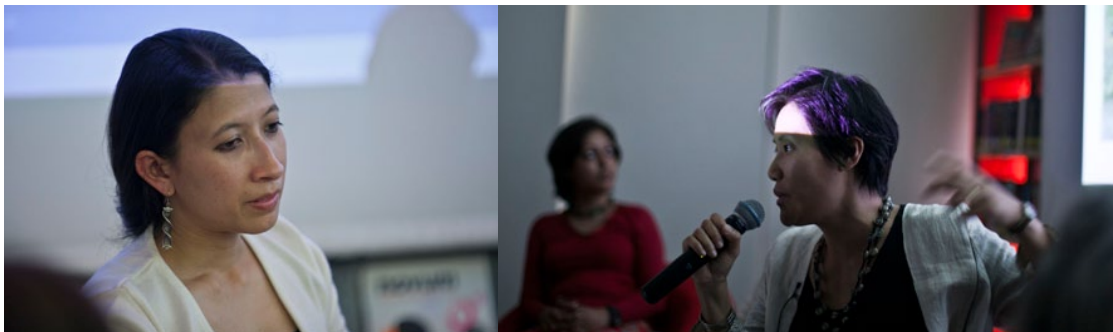
A woman from the CHT community had been raped the previous day. The woman, like others in her position, was apprehensive about going to the police about the rape. Hana said this was because the ethnic Bengali policemen took advantage of the fact that indigenous people were unfamiliar with the Bengali language, and did not write down exactly what indigenous women reported – especially if they were implicating Bengali men in their accounts. If the police were to be believed, Hana said, not one medical test for the rape of a woman or a child has been positive.

Hana said that the hill tribes in Chittagong had to fight for every right in their lives. The CHT commission had been set up to administer peace between the CHT tribes and ethnic Bengalis but the two main causes that led to the commission being formed were never addressed. These were land appropriation and militarization. Thus the Bangladeshi government was not very different from the Pakistani government in its attitude to tribal rights.

Hana spoke about how the hill tribes have always resisted oppression. She gave the example of Kalpana Chakma, who fought against patriarchy and oppression and state power. She was abducted many years ago and the three main suspects have still not been charged. Kalpana's case was symbolic of the military oppression in the region.

According to Hana, the hill tribes took a long time to acknowledge that they were part of Bangladesh even though they had actively supported the nation in the war of 1971. Bengali culture has always been privileged in the state of Bangladesh, and even though indigenous women were often put on display to project the image of a culturally diverse Bangladesh, they were not involved in nation-building activities and their issues remain unaddressed.

Hana ended on a positive note, commenting on how indigenous women were fighting back in various ways. They were taking part in sport, studying law and finding ways to fight the forces against them. The talk ended on a poem that spoke of resistance. "Why shall I not resist? Can they do as they please...estrangle us from our land of birth?"



Dolly Kikon is a political and legal anthropologist. She practiced law and worked as a human rights activist before obtaining her doctoral degree from the Department of Anthropology, Stanford University. Currently, she is a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University. Her research interests include anthropology of the state and human rights; politics of nationalism and territoriality; social histories of violence and militarization; resource conflicts and the indigenous movement; the production of moral and social boundaries; the social life of taboos and transgressions.

Parismita Singh is a writer and artist. Her graphic novel *The Hotel at the End of the Word* (Penguin India) was released in 2009, and shortlisted for the Shakti Bhatt First Book Award (2009-10). She also helped conceptualise the *Pao Anthology of Comics* (Penguin India, 2012). Her interests include primary education in rural Assam and weaving cultures. She is currently working on a collection of short stories.

Dolly and Parismita followed Hana with a presentation on their work with the Dirak Xoonjaan Kakopathar commune in Assam. As an artist and activist collaborating together, they had put up an installation outside the Max Mueller library. A bicycle made of bamboo, decorated with gold thread, handloom and copies of their publication hung by a thread formed part of the installation piece.

Dolly began by speaking about her days as a student in Delhi. She spoke of the power of women's meetings, and how they inspired women to political and social activism. She spoke about her own experiences as a young student when she encountered the generosity of an older generation of activists. Pointing to Urvashi Butalia (present in the audience) who had agreed to attend a conference being organized by Dolly though she didn't know her personally, Dolly recalled how she and some students had simply shown up at Urvashi's office without any formal introduction, and she had immediately agreed to attend. Dolly said that it was this generosity and solidarity that was the true spirit of women's movements all over the world.

Dolly spoke about "fact-finding" missions and how they tended to reinforce the idea of expertise from outside and victimhood for those in the region being investigated, rather than consolidating the sense of solidarity between women from different regions. She reflected on the role of women in conflicts such as in Northeast India, and said that the idea of women as agents of peace was problematic - because it placed women within the purview of victimhood and denied them agency. Instead, Dolly suggested that one look at women in conflict and otherwise as constituents of politics.

She illustrated her point with images of women in the Dirak commune, who look like mothers and housewives, but are in fact actively engaged in politics. Dolly raised the question of whether Naga women were coming to India to speak about sovereignty, or just the men?

Dolly spoke about weaving at the Dirak commune as a political act and about the importance of the space for acts such as weaving when engaging with politics. It was important to look at how women create units of solidarity and spaces for themselves to realise their self worth. She narrated a story of when she began her political work, and was in a hurry to change the world. Her mentor asked her to walk around the fields and take a break and look around her a little. Dolly ended by saying that on International Women's Day, when women across the world were celebrating their politics, their solidarity was the most important aspect of their spirit. She said, "We need to recognize that, and revive the spirit of reciprocal solidarity."

Parasmita picked up the conversation where Dolly left off, by talking more about the women of the commune who she said were all bad cooks – which was a liberating change. The commune itself was established between 1998 and 1999 as a result of conversations that women were having among themselves at a time of political turmoil. The dynamics of change within the commune could be linked to processes taking place within Assam at the time of ULFA's surrender. In 2005-6 women were getting married and moving out of the commune.

According to Parismita, weaving was taken up so that women from different backgrounds could work together and start a conversation amongst themselves. Weaving is a common activity in Assam, a way of life for women. Through the commune and weaving centre, women were able to move out of their homes and live by themselves in rural Assam.

She remarked that although weaves from the northeast have become consumer goods, with the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in Delhi promoting them as the "cause of the tribes", sustainable models of weaving were more than just a means of furnishing the urban middle class. She explained that the gold thread in their installation was not often seen here, but is used in the northeast and was thus used to symbolize the local significance of weaving.

Parasmita and Dolly ended their presentation with a beautiful story they had written about the lives of Assamese women living in conflict, women who negotiate with the militarized state.

Gazala Peer is a political activist from Kashmir, India.



Gazala, who has been witness to the violence in her home state, began her presentation by acknowledging and reiterating Dolly Kikon's statement on women as constituents of politics. She went on to give a history of the freedom struggle in Kashmir. In 1989 and 1990 the Kashmir struggle, dating from before India's independence, turned into an armed conflict and the government of India took several steps to control the "insurgency." At this time, the people of Kashmir had to learn how to deal with AFSPA and the threat of a knock on their doors. In 1993 it became the law that no FIR (First Information Report at police stations) could be lodged without permission, the BSF (Border Security Force) was in constant vigilance, and repression was the word on the street.

Gazala then spoke about her own personal experience of this violence. The men in her family were taken away by the army, and she witnessed the burning alive of seven people. As she grew older she started making sense of these experiences, and of the gestures that women made to one another to signal the atrocities being carried out against them. How they were always ready for the army to barge in, and even the sound of the doorbell made them fearful. She spoke of children's parks being turned into army camps, and being hung with signs that said "Sare Jahaan Se Achha, Hindustan Hamara" (Our Hindustan is better than the whole world). Gazala spoke about visiting Afzal Guru's home and meeting his wife, who remained in a state of silent shock throughout Gazala's visit: she had met her husband five months before he was executed and had not been given a chance to meet him with their son one last time.

Gazala contested her own nationality as "Indian" and questioned the way strands of feminism today do not acknowledge the issue of contested nationality. She asked if feminists could continue to ignore or reject freedom struggles? Could they downplay the context – such as focusing only on Irom Sharmila's 13-year fast in Manipur, but not on AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) against which Sharmila was fasting? She ended on this note, by stating to feminists who don't question the nation state, that Kashmiri feminists have their own understanding of feminism and resistance to oppressive forces.

Priya Thangarajah is a queer feminist, lawyer and activist working with women from the north and east of Sri Lanka.

Priya began by speaking about particular incidents of oppression in Sri Lanka. She spoke of Khadija Omar who was displaced due to the war, and lost her land. When she took the case to court, her lawyers found themselves asking her to compromise. In another case where two women were raped by the military, the women were cross-examined so much that one of them wanted to move away from her husband and society and into an asylum. She spoke of a gay man who was removed from the UN office for his sexuality. She stated that Sri Lanka's primary challenge is funding and funded projects, which are not about people or principles but about vast sums of money involved.



Priya was in agreement with Gazala, and stated that women's issues should not be seen outside of their political context. She raised a few questions for the next generation to think about, of women who could not be included in feminist struggles and about the dominant power of heteronormativity.

She said that partition of a country was seen as the breaking down of the nation state, and that the nation state is akin to the family unit. She called for feminists to imagine different systems of existence such as alternatives to family systems for queer people. Playing on the title of the event she was speaking at, Priya said that although the older generation had to perform acts to become "sinful," the new generation of activists was born "sinful".

Q & A

The discussion opened with a question about the role of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and how it is problematic. Hana responded with an explanation of how women's movements in Bangladesh are being decided by funds and NGOs. The idea for a campaign for women "in heels" came from Alaska and was only one example of Western ideas infiltrating the space of locally based women's movements. She said that CSR was a major practice in Bangladesh, and even the manufacturers of the fairness cream 'Fair and Lovely' provided educational scholarships.

Dolly Kikon added that women's movements have, due to the NGO influence, turned into self help groups and have lost the spirit of activism. Urvashi Butalia from Zubaan also added that CSR has been mandated into corporations involving a lot of "women's" projects, and this would have dire consequences at a time when other forms of funding were scarce.



Anita Dube concluded the discussion by saying that within the CSR mandate, the history of violence and atrocities against women is given more weight than the history of resistance, and so places women within the role of victimhood.

Some of the other ideas that came up during this discussion were that although in the past the critique of feminism was more political, now it is based within the question of nationhood. It was important to forge both political and personal networks across South Asia.

Session 3: Udaas Mausam Ke Khilaaf: Cultures of Resistance

The session was moderated by Urvashi Butalia who began by reading out a translation of the first poem that Amar Sindhu had read out in the previous session. Urvashi had done an impromptu translation, which Amar had approved, and so she was able to communicate Amar's words to the non-Hindi speakers in the audience:

*"On the road to revolution,
Subversive words
Laid themselves on my tongue,
Found their way into my body,
Inserted themselves into my very being...
But I do not know if, for the generations that come after me,
These words will carry deep meaning,
Or if they will use these pages
For kindling."*

Urvashi then introduced the panel, and started the session with Fahmida Riaz as the first speaker. Urvashi said that Fahmida was a particularly appropriate speaker to open a panel called "Udaas Mausam Ke Khilaaf" (Against the Melancholy Season) because Fahmida had seen many troubling times in both India and Pakistan. She said that Fahmida had left India in a state of considerable despair and disillusionment at the rise of the same kind of right-wing and intolerant politics she had been trying to escape in Pakistan.



Fahmida Riaz One of Pakistan's most eminent writers, Fahmida Riaz has a long list of literary achievements to her credit, and has also translated modern and classical Persian and Sindhi literature into Urdu. She has participated all her life in an ongoing struggle for the democratic values in her country. She actively resisted General Zia ul Haq's regime in Pakistan, and spent seven years in exile in India in the 1980s. A well-known rights activist, she has received the Human Rights Watch Hemmet-Hellman Award.

Fahmida began her talk by saying how happy she was to be participating in the event, and how wonderful it was to see a younger generation of women who were taking up activism with great energy and spirit. She laughingly said that she belonged to a generation that ought to retire but poets never do.

Fahmida began by reading out a poem she had written to her niece, who had to face patriarchal discrimination and oppression from all quarters while she was growing up. She followed this with a poem she had written after reading another poem by a female poet who had irritated her by implying in the poem that she, as a mere female, could do nothing – and needed a man to save her. This poem was about the power of womanhood, and how women defy a socially pre-ordained fate.

Engaging Fahmida in conversation, Urvashi asked her to talk about her own fight to have her voice be heard. Fahmida explained that she grew up in a time when Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs lived together and arranged marriages were the norm. Sexuality was freely expressed in Urdu literature. Progressive Urdu literature, as well as the writings of the martyred Marxist activist

Bhagat Singh, shaped her ideas. Her first and second books were received well as she fit into the norm, but the third one faced opposition. This book was about the sexual exploitation of women in a traditional marriage, and it led to strong and negative criticisms from various sides. Fahmida spoke about how she was initially perplexed at the outcry, because there seemed to be no issues if men wrote about sexuality. Then, she said, she came to realize that the same sexual experiences or choices that were available to men in their exercise of male power and privilege were denied women, because the empowerment of women was not socially acceptable: sexuality for a man meant self-assertion, but was turned into self-negation for women.

Urvashi then asked Fahmida if she had ever written against religion? Fahmida explained that yes, her poems had often been regarded as being anti-religion, and she did start writing against religion, but she changed her perspective later. She found that most religions began when society had already institutionalized the subjugation of women, and religion never gave women an equal status. Fahmida said that spirituality was important to her, even though she opposed religion.

Often, Fahmida said, her writings were seen as sedition against the state. Fourteen cases were filed against her under the Act of Sedition, and one charge included the possibility of either several years of hard labour and imprisonment, or – optionally – capital punishment. Faced with this choice, Fahmida remarked humorously that she decided to “jump bail” and come to India where her friend, the poet Amrita Pritam, approached Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister at the time, and Fahmida was allowed to stay in India as a Pakistani exile.

Fahmida then said that she truly began to understand the partition of the subcontinent during her stay in India, when she began to see that the Muslims in India were often discriminated against. She wanted to know why Muslims in India were asked if they were first Muslim or Indian.

Fahmida spoke about how deeply disturbed she was in 1992 when the demolition of the Babri Masjid took place in India. She brought the house down with her recitation of the devastatingly satirical poem she wrote on India at the time: Tum Bilkul Hum Jaise Nikley (You Turned Out Just Like Us) which – with sparkling wit and sarcasm – implied that India and Pakistan were exactly like each other in their favouring of right-wing, religious fundamentalism in politics.

Kutti Revathi is a contemporary poet of first rank, has been an important Tamil voice, dealing with the politics of the female body through poetry, her chosen literary form. Some of her poems, such as “Mulaigal” (Breasts), have achieved iconic status all over the world. A serious practitioner of her art, she has explored the zone of caste and the female oppressive condition with verve, honesty and with a remarkable inventiveness in language and expression. As an engaged and committed person, she has also contributed through founding and editing a feminist journal, *Panikkudam*, as well as through helping younger women poets to publish their work. She believes very much in exploring creative visualization, a tool for empowerment as a woman and engages herself in making documentaries and other forms of visual art.



Kutti Revathi belongs to a group of radical Tamil women writers who write on issues of caste, sex and class. Her book *Mulaigal* (Breasts) was condemned by the Tamil literary establishment, and there were calls to burn it on the streets of Chennai.

Kutti Revathi spoke of how she was interested in the female body. This, at first, led her to be a doctor in order to understand what was happening inside and outside the body. She decided to study the indigenous Siddha system of medicine, and was able to do so because of the support of her father.

After that she began to write, and the writing flowed quite naturally. She spoke about the controversy around Mulaigal, and the ugly and misogynistic response she had to bear. One of her closest friends told her that he wanted to personally burn all copies of her book. Another prominent male poet said he wanted to “give her a hard slap”, and an embarrassed postman had to deliver sexually explicit and obscene postcards to her mailbox. Revathi said this was a very dark time for her personally. She often wondered what she had done to deserve this response when all she wanted to do was to write about the body.

In this context, Kutti Revathi spoke about the year 2000 being a pivotal year for writing in Tamil. That year, writers from Dalit and tribal backgrounds began to emerge, people who had otherwise been silenced by history. Kutti explained that this was unique not only because people from these communities had not written before, but because they had not been written about either. In this sense, they were remarkably free from the shackles of literary tradition. And so, writing about women changed at around this time, moving on from a deification of the female, to a much more direct engagement with women through powerful personal stories.

Resistance, therefore, has always come from women, said Kutti Revathi. Initially, few women wrote in their own voices, fearful of being ostracized or of being called bad writers. She spoke of women who, without formal training, like the writer Sundari wrote poetry even though she had never studied beyond junior school.

Kutti Revathi spoke of the need to identify gender within questions of caste, and identified three important events in her own political journey: protesting the death penalty, the anti nuclear movement and the genocide of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka. She spoke of how activists have empowered her and her writing, ending with the statement “We don’t need God anymore, we just need the body.” She read out her Tamil poem Mulaigal (Breasts), the English translation of which was read out by the next speaker, A. Mangai.



A. Mangai is the pseudonym of Dr. V. Padma. She has been actively engaged in Tamil theatre as an actor, director and playwright for almost three decades. She writes in Tamil and English. She hopes that her academic, activist and artistic selves can find a vibrant intersection in her work. Her fields of interest are theatre, gender and translation studies. A Fulbright Scholar twice, she presently teaches English at Stella Maris College, Chennai and is an Academic Council Member of NSD.

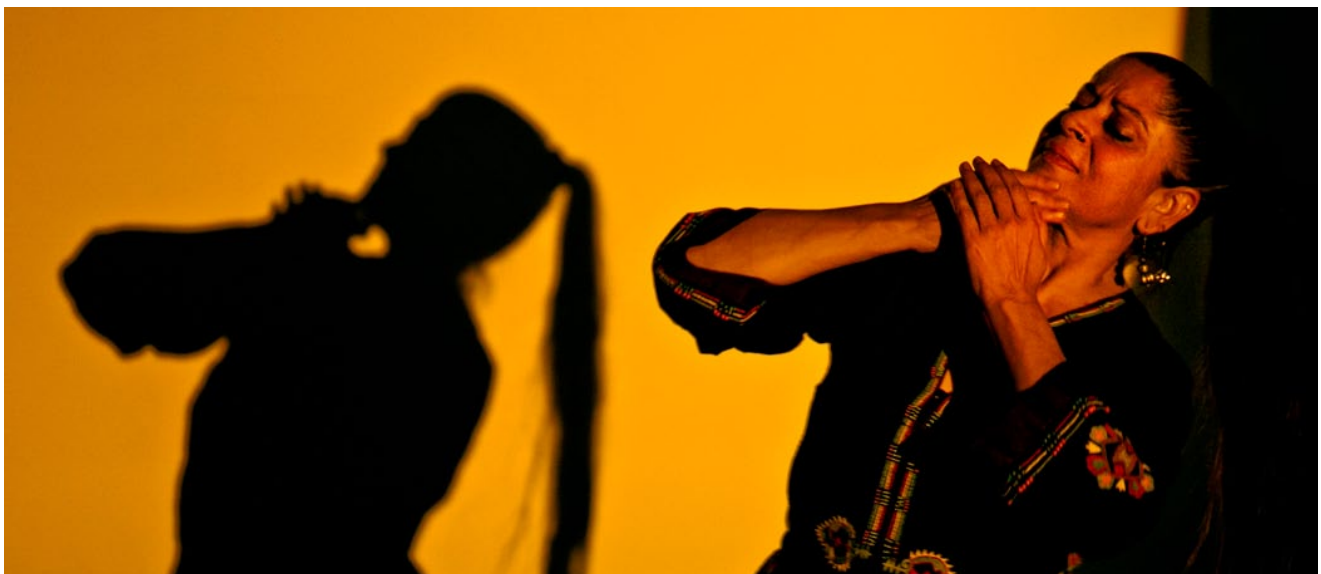
“You can’t sell a needle in a blacksmith’s tree,” Mangai began humorously, referring to the filmmakers present in the audience since she was going to be showing video clips of her work in theatre. She asked them to bear with her obvious lack of filmmaking expertise.

She spoke of her love for theatre: theatre never let her be alone, since it was a collective process. Theatre, she said, was ephemeral, and moved one even on the hundredth show of the same play, because each show was different. The audience, she added, completed the show for the theatre actor.

At the same time, Mangai said, theatre had a history of patriarchy and control, with the female body on stage being seen as dangerous. Women were often excluded from theatre, with men performing women's roles in traditional forms like Kathakali. She spoke of how female legacies in theatre were not taken seriously, with women singers being used only to gather a crowd. Mangai said that in performances of the Tamil epic Manimekalai women as professional stage artistes got from theatre what real life could not give them. They performed with moustaches, with musicians and with faces painted. Mangai showed a video excerpt of this performance. The images were of women performers owning the stage with complete confidence. Mangai's screen presentations highlighted the socialization of gender roles. With this, Mangai brought up the point that often identity politics are looked at as the burden and responsibility of solely those who belong to that identity, but this was unacceptable to her. Mangai said that she had been working for transgender people, to get them access to basic civic amenities such as IDs and ration cards.

Mangai ended with the strong statement "When the world is too much for us, we play... we play with our powers, we play our powers."

Urvashi said that everything the women were saying was so powerful and moving that it was hard to really come up with anything much to say as a concluding remark. She introduced the last speaker of the day, Nahid Siddiqui, by saying that in a day that had looked at the resistance of women in art, literature, theatre and activism, it was appropriate to be ending with dance.



Nahid Siddiqui is a renowned Kathak dancer. She began dancing under the guidance of Maharaj Ghulam Hussain Kathak of Lahore. As a member of PIA Arts Academy, she travelled and performed all over the world. Her reputation as a dancer of rare distinction grew, and a television series "Payal" was initiated in 1978 in which Nahid danced variations of classical Kathak. In 1979 she left Pakistan for London, where she started teaching Kathak at the Birmingham Arts Council. Nahid has won many awards. These include the Pride of Performance award and the Faiz Ahmed Faiz award in Pakistan; the Time Out Award, the Digital Award, British Cultural Award, and International Dance Award in England.

Pakistan's foremost Kathak dancer, Nahid Siddiqui began by saying that "we need to celebrate womanhood, no matter what." She spoke about the very difficult times she had overcome in her own life, especially of the time when the Pakistani president Zia-ul-Haq seized power. A general ban on dancing in Pakistan was brought into place, and Nahid was accused of being an Indian spy, and being anti-Islamic because she was dancing.

What allowed Nahid to sail through these troubled times, she said, was dance. “When my spirit is in action, that’s when I start to dance. It expresses my soul...I can’t be intellectual beyond a point.” She said she always took refuge in dance.

Nahid spoke about her early life, when her father was arrested and imprisoned under the rule of Gen. Ayub Khan in Pakistan. This was her first traumatic experience of life under martial law. She said she missed her father deeply, and could not comprehend what had happened. She spoke with gratitude of the school she attended at the time. Her mother was told that Nahid could stay on at the fee of only a rupee a year, until her father was released. Meanwhile, Nahid’s mother started supporting the family by acting in films and the theatre. Nahid’s story of her mother resonated with her own story. She talked about how, when her father released from jail, he could not accept his wife’s new role, but eventually he began to accept it. Her mother, Nahid said, was her role model and she was lucky to have had such a strong woman figure in the family.



Her father, she said, struggled with the idea of his daughter as a dancer but finally came to accept it. Nahid spoke particularly movingly of the time she tried to leave Pakistan after dance was banned under Gen. Zia-ul-Haq. She recounted how she was dragged off the plane, detained for hours, and finally made to sign a declaration that she would never dance again, unless at the express wish of the Pakistani government. At this point she said, “A tear rolled out of my eye, but I told myself – no Nahid, you will not cry.” Nahid never lost hope, and eventually returned to Pakistan for a performance after General Zia-ul-Haq’s death, and now teaches dance in Lahore.

Nahid spoke of dance as painting with her body. She spoke of her guru with great fondness, saying that he never made her “feel like a woman.” She spoke of how she was not allowed to come to India to learn dance from maestro Birju Maharaj. Instead Prime Minister Bhutto of Pakistan offered Nahid an academy of her own in Pakistan. She later learned from Birju Maharaj during the years of her exile in England.

Nahid ended by talking about how she was currently working with Sufi poems and compositions in her dance, especially the poetry of the Punjabi mystic Bulleh Shah “Everything is earth, everything is made of the same stuff.”

After this, Nahid performed for the audience. Bathed in a circular glow of yellow light, she danced to Allama Iqbal’s famous poem “Sitaaron Se Aagey Jaahaan Aur Bhi Hain, recited on the soundtrack in her own voice. The audience was mesmerized and moved by the beauty and

polished minimalism of her outstanding performance, as much as by the beautifully enunciated poem. The poem touches upon the motif of freedom, urging the listener to live beyond everyday cycles of day and night, and instead seek feats beyond one's limits. To fly like a falcon, move on, and instead of loneliness, seek connection in a crowd, knowing that there are boundless possibilities for life.

*Sitaron se aage jahan aur bhi hain
Abhi ishq ke imtehan aur bhi hain...
Gaye din ke tanha tha main anjuman mein
Yahaan ab mere raazdaan aur bhi hain.*

Session 4: Hitting Back with Humor: Laughter as Sabotage

This final session of the day was on a different note altogether, with comic performances by Vasu Primlani and Maya Rao, celebrating the power of laughter as a weapon against injustice and discrimination.



Vasu Primlani is a professional comic who has performed in the US and India at over 200 shows, and is probably the only comic in the world to perform during a flight in the United States. She is a keen observer of life around her, is often baffled by meaningless events and things. She constantly questions the notion of 'normal', and challenges the male-dominated and heterosexist mindset of society. She is best known for her physical humor and deadpan expressions. She is an award-winning environmentalist, and India's first openly gay comedian.

Vasu's stand-up set spoke of several issues beginning with the lack of female comedians and ending in the relationship between women and the Indian state.

Her routine touched upon the current state of affairs in India, female sexual abuse and the male gaze. By pointing out the obvious forms of oppression that women face in cities in India, she had the crowd in splits. Her performance also spoke of the politics of the environment and justice among other things.

Maya Krishna Rao works in theatre in different ways, both on and off stage. She creates her own performances, sometimes alone; at other times collaboratively with sound and space designers, and filmmakers. Her early training in Kathakali is a source of inspiration both in her teaching and performances. Her shows have traveled to different countries and have been received with acclaim. Her most recent work is *Walk*, made in response to the horrific gang rape and tragic death of Jyoti Pande. She has been the subject of a Doordarshan documentary *Portrait of Maya Krishna Rao*; she was featured in an NBT publication edited by Ritu Menon *Women Who Dared* (2002) as one of twenty notable living Indian women. Maya received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Acting in 2010.



Maya ended the day on a hilarious note. She started with a slide presentation on the journey of her own life, in which she made up a fictitious parallel narrative to describe the images on screen, all delivered in a strong faux Malayalam accent.

The humour was underpinned by a narrative that highlighted the role of oppressive forces in society, as well as the strong female role models that Maya followed in her own life. She also highlighted the class and caste factors within the identity of women. Her performance ended in an improvised dance routine, wherein she mentioned a gang rape akin to the one that took place on 16 December and others that have taken place across the country. Maya's interpretation of her struggles and the role of women in traditional society, versus the reality of a woman's lived experience was captivating. The performance made the crowd quite emotional.



These final performances of the day saw a larger crowd, and as everyone walked out into the gardens of Max Mueller Bhawan, inspired with the resolve to work harder on struggles against oppression, one couldn't help but marvel at this strong community of resilient and diverse people.

**Report by Tarini Manchanda with inputs from Anupama Chandra
Photographs by Sudhanshu Malhotra**

